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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAHRAN 000295

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS AND JEREMY BERNDT

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [YM](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#)  
SUBJECT: SAUDI BORDER CONFLICT WITH YEMEN RAISES FEAR OF SECTARIAN  
BACKLASH AGAINST SHIAS

REF: A. A. DHAHRAN 222  
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CLASSIFIED BY: Joseph Kenny, Dhahran Consul General, Department  
of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)  
SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Prominent members of the Eastern Province (EP) Shia  
community are growing increasingly worried that the conflict in  
Yemen will spur a backlash against their community. The  
attitude is prevalent among Shia youth as well. Statements by a  
Yemeni official, as well as a recent circular issued by  
conservative Saudi clerics, have charged Shia in the Middle East  
region with supporting the Houthi rebels of northern Yemen.  
Prominent Saudi Shia have come out to unequivocally declare  
their allegiance to the SAG. However, from observations in the  
Eastern Province all the way to Najran, the feared backlash has  
not occurred. Sentiment is mixed, with the Shia leadership  
expressing unequivocal support of the SAG versus the everyday  
Shia who maintains a more nuanced view. END SUMMARY.

Growing Concerns of a Backlash  
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[1](#)2. (S) On November 23, PolOff traveled to the predominantly Shia  
city of Qatif and met with Sheikh Mohammed al-Mahfoodh  
(protect), a respected Shia with a political and scholarly  
orientation and a moderate commentator on Islamic affairs (Note:  
al-Mahfoodh was also one of a number of politically active Shia  
who went into exile during the early 1980's and returned after a  
deal was struck with King Fahd in 1993 which allowed politically  
exiled Shias to return to KSA. End Note.) Also, in attendance  
was Mohammed al-Shayookh (protect), a Shia political commentator  
and activist with strong ties to the Qatif area; and Hussein  
al-Alak (protect), the managing editor for Rasid.com online news  
site (ref a). Al-Mahfoodh expressed deep concern over a recent  
circular issued by Wahhabi clerics (with 42 signatories) that  
called for all Muslims to be aware of Shia plots, and accused  
Iran of being responsible for the Houthi uprising in Yemen.  
(Note: PolOff has not seen a copy of the circular, though  
rasid.com claims to have received a copy. End Note.)

Al-Shayookh echoed his concerns, noting that the longer the conflict lasts, the greater the chance for a sectarian backlash against the Shia. (Comment: To date, there are no reported cases of reprisals against Shia for alleged association or support of Houthis in Yemen. End comment.)

#### Shia Pledge Allegiance to the King

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¶3. (C) Prominent members of the Shia community have publicly voiced support for the SAG. In mid-November, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, a moderate and influential Saudi Shia scholar, issued a statement condemning the "violations of Yemeni infiltrators" and affirmed his loyalty to the Kingdom. He objected to involving Saudi Arabia (and the region) in a war in which they have no interest. He went on to state that "We are all partners in this nation and we must have present a unified stance with the leadership against any outside aggression." (Note: PolOff received the statement via email from Jafar al-Shayab (protect), a writer, advocate, and Chairman of the Qatif Municipal Council. The statement was also featured on Rasid.com. End Note.) Sheikh al-Saffar also called on Muslim world media to stop using inflammatory sectarian language.

¶4. (C) Other prominent figures of the Shia community spoke out in mid-November against the Yemeni Foreign Minister, Abu Bakr al-Qurbi, who accused Shia in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Bahrain of providing financial, political, and sectarian support to Houthi rebels. Dr. Tawfiq al-Saif, a well-regarded researcher who specializes in Shia political jurisprudence, and Najeeb al-Khunaizi, a public Shia figure and political activist, condemned the statement and voiced unwavering support for the SAG. Dr. al-Saif added: "Safety of our country's soil is the

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responsibility of the government and the nation and the Shia are part of the nation . . . Support to Houthi rebels just because they are Shia is not true and the distinction between sectarian position and the patriotism is firm and clear."

#### Contrasting Views from Shia on the Street

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¶5. (S) The leadership's pronouncements stand in contrast to the view on the street. On November 22, PolOff met with Isa al-Muzel (protect), Qatif Municipality Council Member, to discuss the growing concerns of a sectarian backlash against the Shia community. Al-Muzel expressed concern regarding the strong show of support by some Shia leaders on behalf of the SAG. Although he recognized the need to respond to questions of Shia loyalty to the SAG, he deemed it politically dangerous for them to do so in such an unequivocal manner. The average Shia, said al-Muzel, is not in favor of such open and vocal support of the SAG, especially when religious discrimination against Shia of the EP continues unabated.

¶6. (C) Such views were echoed by a small group of up-and-coming young Qatifi activists (ages ranging from 18 to 25) with whom PolOff met in a meeting arranged by Hussein al-Alak (protect) on November 23. The group was led by Mohammad al-Sadiq (protect), a young writer employed as a Human Resources Administrative Coordinator for the SaudiReadyMix Company. Although the group

expressed support for the SAG, they preferred an immediate cessation of hostilities. They expressed deep frustration of constantly having to reassert their loyalty to a government that continues to close down their mosques and discriminates against them based on religious orientation. (Note: In predominantly Shia Qatif, Shia mosques remain open and have not suffered from the government crackdown in towns and neighborhoods where Shiites do not make up the majority of the population, such as Al-Hasa, Dammam, and al-Khobar (ref b). End note.)

Najran: Closer to the Conflict

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17. (S) On December 13, PolOff met with Ali Borman Al-Yami (protect), an influential Ismaili businessman originally from Najran. Al-Yami has direct access to the Governor of Najran, Prince Mishal bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, and is working with him to establish a Najran-based holding company (ref C). He travels to Najran often, most recently in late November. Al-Yami expressed little concern that sectarianism will affect the predominantly Ismaili Shia province of Najran, going so far as to say that even the longtime Houthi residents of Najran are detached from the conflict and have not been targeted, even as the border conflict has intensified.

Al-Yami also spoke of Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar's attempts in recent weeks to reach out to the Shia in the Najran region and to have Al-Yami assist in reaching out to them. Al-Yami remarked that he dissuaded Al-Saffar from making the trip, and expressed his wishes not to get involved in religious matters. Al-Yami was unclear as to Al-Saffar's motives, other than a desire to reach out to Shia in Najran. Al-Yami was not aware that Al-Saffar ever made the trip to Najran.

Comment

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18. (C) The Shia of the Eastern Province (EP) have little in common culturally or ideologically with the Shia of northern Yemen. Thus, Shia-based sympathy in the EP should not be assumed. The statements issued by leaders of the Shia community are a concerted reaction to allegations that they are not loyal to the SAG. They are fearful that as the conflict draws on,

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accusations of sympathizing with the Shia of northern Yemen will increase. As a result, they have sought to emphasize their support of the SAG in the media. To date, Post is unaware of any instances of a backlash against the Shia here. Should this occur, it will contribute further to the discrimination already experienced by Eastern Province Shia and hence raise sectarian tensions considerably, especially among the Shia youth (ref D).

19. (C) Najranis, on the other hand, do have deep cultural, religious, and tribal ties to the Shia of northern Yemen (ref C). However, the cordial relationship between the Governor of Najran, Prince Mishal bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, and the majority Suleimani Shias of Najran is an important incentive to dissuading Najranis from involvement in the conflict. Should a crackdown against the Shia of Najran occur, it would tarnish the reportedly good relations between the Governor and populace. To date, Post is not aware of any instances of a backlash against

the Najran region Shia on the grounds that they support the  
Houthis in Yemen. End comment.  
CG: JKENNY